Cyberbullying in Australia

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Sociodemographic aspects

Australia is the only country that occupies an entire continent, sharing no land boundaries with any other nations. It is the world's largest island and the sixth largest country, having a land area of 7 692 024 km². As of December 2008 Australia had approximately 21 644 000 people residing in its six states and two territories (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Although common perceptions of Australia are often those of wide-open spaces and abundant flora and fauna, most of Australia's population is found in a handful of densely populated areas on the eastern seaboard.

The Australian system of government is founded in the liberal democratic tradition, which upholds religious tolerance, freedom of speech and association, and the rule of law. Australia's institutions and practices of government reflect British and North American models, but are at the same time uniquely Australian.The Constitution of 1901 establishes the Commonwealth parliament, comprising the Queen (represented by the Governor General) and a bicameral system of two houses of parliament: the Senate and the House of Representatives. There are three levels of government: Federal, State and Local. The Federal Government holds power over defense, foreign affairs, trade and commerce, taxation, customs and excise duties, pensions, immigration and postal services while other powers are held by the States.

Use of ICTs

Australia is one of the primary users of technology, ranking third in the world, behind Sweden and the United States in terms of internet penetration and use. In 2007, 67% of

Australian homes had internet access compared to a European average of 56%. Broadband usage was also high at an estimated 4.3 million connections or 52% of the population, compared to a European average of 43.4% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b). The greater majority of people, 64%, accessed the internet from home and 33% accessed the internet from work. Of the 9.9 million who accessed the internet from home in 2006-2007, 98% reported using it for personal and private reasons (such as emails and online shopping) 53% used it for education and study and 52% for work related purposes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b).

It has been 20 years now since the internet was first introduced into Australia, and since then over one half (12 million) of Australians have become connected. Initially only available to universities, the internet gained commercial status in the early 1990s. Australians under 25 are among the greatest adopters of new technologies and are the highest users of the internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008c). By 2000 there were 58% of Australian children (5-12 years-old) and 86% of adolescents (13-18 years-old) who had Internet access either at home or at school (ABA, 2002). Families with dependent children were more likely to have internet access at home (86%) than other family types (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008c).

Technologies such as personal music devices, personal organisers, mobile phones, portable computers, and remote internet connection have created a seamless on and offline social life for most adolescents. The progressive shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 to mobile technology has seen a change in the way people access and interact with these digital communication devices. In February of 1996, only 24% of all households owned or paid for a mobile phone. However, this jumped to 72% in 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). According to online research data, 23% of Australian children aged six to 13 own a mobile

phone, with girls being more likely to own a phone than boys (Downie & Glazebrook, 2007). Social networking sites have been another phenomenon that has increased exponentially since their conception. MySpace alone has increased from 4.9 million members in November of 2004 to over 70 million in 2006, and was rated as the tenth most popular site in April 2009 (Young, 2009). Facebook, with approximately 115 million new members being added each month has been identified as Australia's third most popular site.

Most young Australians regard the Internet and the mobile phone as a necessary part of their social life and their identity (Campbell, 2005). In a recent Australian study 626 students ranging in age from 10- to 16-years-old reported they spent an average time of 6 hours a week socialising online (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2009) which accords with the 49 minutes a day found in 2007 (Australian Communications and Media Authority). More socially anxious Australian students seem to spend more time chatting online than non-anxious students (Bonetti et al., 2009; Mazalin & Moore, 2004).

Educational system

Australia has a well-developed education system with participation rates among the highest in the world. Each state government manages the school system in their state, providing funds and regulations for these schools. This means that small differences may be seen, however learning areas are the same throughout in relation to the National Curriculum that has been developed. Students attend school from Monday to Friday each week, for approximately 6.5 hours per week. The school year extends from late January/early February until December. There is a short holiday between terms and a longer holiday in December and January. Most states and territories have a four-term year except for Tasmania, which has

a three-term school year. Attendance is compulsory between the ages of six and 16 (Grades one to 10). Years of schooling consist of a preparatory year before grade one (not compulsory but almost always undertaken), primary school (grades one to six or one to seven), and secondary school (grades seven to 12 or eight to 12).

There are three types of school systems in Australia; government schools, systemic catholic schools, and independent schools (mostly religiously oriented). All schools prepare students for the same national, recognised qualifications of the country. As of August 2008 there were 9562 schools in Australia, of which 6833 were government and 2729 were non-government schools. Of these 70.5% were primary only, 15.9% were secondary only, and 13.6% were combined primary/secondary (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a).

Bullying-School violence

While bullying at school has long been recognised as existing in Australian literature the empirical study of the phenomenon really did not begin until 1989-90.

In 1994 an Australian Commonwealth Senate inquiry into school violence resulted in the publication of an influential report '*Sticks and Stones: A report on violence in Schools'*. This inquiry heralded a nationwide movement to address the issue of school violence, particularly bullying. While the report generally concluded that school violence was not an issue in Australian schools, bullying was. The inquiry raised significant questions regarding the frequency of violence in Australian culture, the impact of violence on the community, and identified the need for intervention programs to reduce violence, particularly that associated with bullying.

Overall, in 2003 between one in five and one in seven students reported being bullied face-to-face once a week or more. In Australia victimization is more frequently

reported by younger students and girls generally report less victimization than boys. In secondary school the amount of bullying was highest in Years 8 and 9 (Slee, 2003).

Specific antibullying curriculum

Although Australia lacks a specific anti-bullying curriculum, there is the National Safe Schools Framework developed by a Ministerial Council. It promulgates an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, as well as harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect. The education sector comprises both the national and state government as well as non-government authorities. This framework is a collaborative effort by all states of Australia and presents a way of achieving a shared vision of physical and emotional safety and wellbeing for all students in all Australian schools. The Framework is guided by principles that recognise the need for sustained positive approaches that include an appreciation of the ways in which social attitudes and values impact on the behaviour of students in the school communities.

While there is currently no specific anti-bullying curriculum mandated in Australian schools there are many commercially available programs which address face-to-face or direct bullying. In a recent Australian study of 12 schools it was found that anti-bullying programs were implemented more in primary schools than any other social emotional program (MacAuley, Parker, Campbell, & Battistutta, 2008).

Early awareness of the cyberbullying problem

There was some academic interest shown in examining adolescent behaviour and the Internet in Australia in 2004. In that year Fleming and Rickwood published a paper in Youth Studies Australia entitled “Teens in Cyberspace: Do they encounter friend or foe?”

Interestingly while the article discusses addiction, pornography and sexual predators as "foes" there is no mention of cyberbullying. This lack of attention to bullying was also evident in the special edition of *Behaviour Change,* in the Journal of the Australian Association of Cognitive and Behaviour Therapy, which examined the Internet and behaviour. In the media the first mention (according to the database of the Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre) was in the Daily Telegraph in August 2003 when the NSW Parents and Citizens Federation president conducted an informal survey of some 40 classrooms and found cyberbullying incidents. In the following year, 2004, Campbell and Gardner's study on the prevalence of cyberbullying in Year 8 at one school was presented at a Brisbane conference.

Politicians' responses

Policy makers in one state: South Australia, moved quickly when cyberbullying was first noted. South Australia was probably the first jurisdiction in Australia to bring this issue to the attention of school principals soon after the first mention of cyberbullying in the Australian press, in 2003. Cyberbullying was first mentioned in South Australia in the resource for schools *Reducing Bullying in schools: A professional development resource* provided to all Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) schools in July 2004.

Studies about cyberbullying

Prevalence data

In the first Australian study of 120 Grade 8 students, it was found that over a quarter of the students knew someone who had been cyber bullied, while 11% identified themselves as

bullying others using cyber technology and a further 14% reported being targets of cyber bullying (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). A survey of 2,027 eleven and twelve-year-olds attending Western Australian Catholic schools found that almost 10% had been sent hurtful messages on the internet during the past school term, with the figure being as high as 12.5% among girls (Epstein, Waters, & Cross, 2006). Similar data from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre's (CHPRC) Survey Service (collected from secondary schools across Australia from 2005-2006) indicates that 13% of the 1,286 students participating in the survey had received hurtful messages using SMS, while 15% had received hurtful messages through the internet.

Student interview data recently collected by the CHPRC shows that many young people feel that cyber bullying is far more harmful than face-to-face bullying. Some reasons for this include the finding that nearly 50% of those bullied indicated they did not know who was doing the bullying; because many found it hard to get away from the bullying which now followed them into their home, and because more young people claim they would bully others more often using technology and that they could be nastier than they could be face to face (Cross, Shaw, Hearn, Epstein, Monks, et al., 2009).

The Australian Communications and Media Authority investigation into young people's use of online social media (see Click and Connect Report, 2009) found that the incidence of cyberbullying increased with age, with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of 16-17-year-olds reporting having experienced some form of cyberbullying. By contrast, only 1% of 8-9-year-olds and 10% of 10-11-year-olds reported having experienced it. It was more prevalent over the internet than the mobile phone, with 10% of 16/17 yr olds reporting having been cyberbullied over the mobile phone, whereas 17% reported bullying over the internet. While cyberbullying occurs with less frequency than face-to-face bullying, its prevalence is still appreciable and

possibly increasing in Australia, as it is elsewhere in the world (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006). It is noted that as technology has become more available in more sophisticated and diverse forms, bullying has emerged via each medium: initially through emails, then text messages and mobile phones and most recently through photographs and websites. Capturing the prevalence of cyberbullying across time, thus requires insight into the mediums employed.

Common forms

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (Cross et al., 2009) defined being cyberbullied, as having any of the following happen over the internet or via a mobile phone, every few weeks or more often, in the term: sending threatening emails; nasty messages were sent either through the internet or via text messages or prank calls to mobile phones were made; someone masquerading as another by using a screen name or password not their own; sending on private emails, messages, pictures or videos to others; mean or nasty comments or pictures sent or posted to websites or mobile phones; and being deliberately left out or ignored over the Internet. These represent the common taxonomies of cyberbullying as reported in previously published studies (Willard, 2007), such as: flaming, harassment, denigration, outing, exclusion, cyber-stalking and impersonation. As with any definitions or attempts at categorising behaviours, there are those which are contentious: flaming is one of these, as it seems to imply conflict between individuals of similar status, rather than involve any power differential, which is necessary for any act to be considered bullying. When a bullying lens is applied to these forms, perhaps only harassment, denigration, outing and trickery and exclusion are true forms of cyberbullying, in that they capture the core elements of face-to-face bullying. In contrast, rather than use specific behaviours to identify the various forms, the Australian Communications and Media Authority Click & Connect Report

(2009, p63) gave a definition which reflected current global understandings of cyberbullying: "*Cyberbullying is when someone repeatedly uses the internet or a mobile phone to deliberately upset or embarrass somebody else. It is intended to harm others and can include sending mean or nasty words or pictures to someone over the internet or mobile phone*". Participants were then asked if they had been exposed to any cyberbullying incidents via their mobile phone, over the internet or both. The use of qualitative methodologies to elicit the lived realities of participants' experiences and behaviours when involved in cyberbullying, either as targets or protagonists, will become increasingly important as the technologies change in the coming years.

Spears, Slee, Owens and Johnson (2009) in their qualitative study of covert bullying commissioned by the Australian government, found that cyberbullying was enacted both overtly and covertly. Direct abuse, or stalking someone *without* trying to conceal identity or remain hidden, were *overt* acts of bullying using technology. *Covert* forms of cyberbullying, such as exclusion, isolation and manipulation of the peer group, clearly reflect more social and relational forms of bullying using technology.

Gender and age differences

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (Cross et al., 2009) reported on 7,418 children and young people, (3521 males (48%); 3874 females (52%)) from Grades 4- 9 drawn from 106 schools. Bullying generally was found to be a significant issue for Australian schools, but there was very little difference found across the broad demographic areas of gender, sector (government/ non government schools) and location (geographic area) (p 188). Cyberbullying however, showed a clear upward trend across year levels, and this was

consistent for those who were bullied (Year 4: 4.9% (n=1412) to Year 9: 7.8%) (n=1028) and who bullied others (Year 4:1.2% to Year 9: 5.6%). An interesting difference related to type of sector: government /non-government school, with more students in non-government schools using cyberbullying as they got older. Of year 9 students (approximately aged 14-15) in non-government schools who admitted bullying others (13%), 10% reported cyberbullying. Females were slightly more likely than males to have been bullied covertly, and for all forms of bullying, males were more likely to admit that they bullied others.

Spears et al. (2009) found that covert and cyberbullying were useful contemporary strategies for either gender, and that it was not necessarily the specific domain of either one. Boys in this study engaged in manipulation, exclusion and isolation of others, in the same ways that girls were, but were using different activities. Boys, for example, used exclusion in sporting activities. The cyber aspect to this, concerns the use of text messaging, to set up who would be excluded/not have the ball passed/kicked to them, followed by someone actively filming it, so it could be uploaded to a video sharing site. Technology has seemingly enabled boys to up-skill in the use of indirect, socially and relationally aggressive behaviours, which have traditionally been more often associated with girls in the past: employing patterns of acceptance and rejection, isolation and exclusion, manipulating the peer group and friendships through verbal and psychological means.

Impact on victims

No longitudinal studies have yet been published describing the effects of cyberbullying, but researchers believe that the longer-term effects of cyberbullying may be more serious than those of face-to-face bullying (Campbell, 2005). Young people report

qualitatively that cyber bullying is more hurtful than face-to-face bullying (Cross et al., 2009).

Students who cyber bully others regularly are also at risk of negative social and developmental outcomes. Australian data suggest these students are more likely to experience a number of adverse social and internalising and externalising psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, delinquent, anti-social or criminal behaviours including alcohol and other drug use problems, violence, vandalism, graffiti use, and/or theft which appear to remain stable and extend into adulthood (Rigby, 2003; Rigby and Slee, 1999). Recent data from the ACBPS found that students who were covertly bullied or who covertly bullied others reported lower levels of connectedness to their school, higher levels of loneliness at school, felt less safe at school and were more likely to experience difficulties such as emotional symptoms, conduct problems, inattention and peer relationship problems, compared with students who were not covertly bullied (Cross et al., 2009). Young people who bully others using cyber technology also report they feel they can continually apply more severe methods of intimidation, starting with texting, followed by chat rooms, and then e-mail (Campbell, 2005).

McLoughlin, Meyricke and Burgess (2009) found among a sample of 349 rural and regional youth that videoing or photographing a person being bullied and posting these images on the web was the most severe form of cyberbullying. In Australia, the rural and regional areas can be quite remote, and as such technology plays an increasingly important role in the daily lives of young people living in these areas. Spears et al's qualitative study (2009) reported that the impact on victims was: physical, in that victims stayed away from or left the school or the town; psychological and emotional , in terms of the damage to self esteem, increased anxiety and fear and made them feel vulnerable, isolated, bewildered and powerless.

Overlap between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying

Smith et al. (2008) state that cyberbullying seems to have some different characteristics to face-to-face bullying, yet there is seemingly much that overlaps with it. Some cybervictims have been found to also be victimised face to face, and young people who cyberbully others were also found to bully others face to face (Cross et al., 2009) Some students also engage in both behaviours, with some authors speculating that cyberbullying may be used to seek retribution against those who have inflicted harm via face-to-face means (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). However, it is not yet determined whether cyberbullying is a construct in its own right, or if it is a means of conducting more face-to-face bullying.

Methodological issues

Similar to cyberbullying research published in North America and Europe, Australian cyberbullying research comprises mostly cross-sectional studies that suggest the behaviour is fairly widespread among young people. Of the few studies conducted, comparisons with other research are hampered by a lack of consistent definitions of the behavioural construct of cyberbullying, timeframes, and the use of different methods and inconsistent measures (often with unreported psychometric properties). For example, the use of either a global behaviour or specific cyberbullying behaviours in Australia resulted in different outcomes when identifying prevalence rates, and predictors of cyberbullying behaviours (Cross et al., 2009). Using specific cyberbullying behaviour measures the mean grades 4-9 prevalence rate was 7.3% and the bullying rates were highest among males, whereas for the global cyberbullying measure the mean prevalence rate was 4.5% and was highest for females.

These methodological and definitional differences mean most of the findings published are not generalisable, making meaningful comparisons between Australian and other countries' studies problematic (Kowalski, 2008). Moreover, the ages and selection of study participants, and period of time covered often vary considerably among the studies. Due to the rapidly shifting nature of the technological environment, it is also possible that cyberbullying research may only be relevant to the particular context of time and place, unlike research undertaken in the more static environments of schools, which change slowly. Importantly these variable research methodologies have limited the opportunities in Australia to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies.

In addition to definitional ambiguity, there is a need to clarify methodological issues. Self-report is often used, as are peer nomination and teacher nomination, to study face-to-face bullying. For example, what is the best time-frame to assess prevalence (e.g. ever, in the last month, this school term, in the last year)? What are the most useful methods of sampling to avoid self selection bias? For example, some researchers have recruited participants from websites, while others have sampled from students in school.

Actions against cyberbullying

While some forms of cyber bullying prevention media and publications have been produced for Australian schools by government and non-government organisations, none as yet are empirically tested. Despite this lack of evidence-based resources educational departments, school administrators, teachers, parents and researchers continue to invest increasing amounts of time and money into school based anti-bullying interventions. In a recent systematic review of school-based interventions to prevent bullying, Vreeman and Carroll (2007) highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of 26 school-based interventions that

included randomised control trials. The review drew attention to the varying success rates of different projects, suggesting that while there is no magic solution, the extent to which schools take ownership of the problem, the holistic way in which they apply their efforts, and the sustained application of their policy and related activities over the longer term may be a key factor in the degree of success. More specifically the review notes that curriculum only interventions, based on promoting anti-bullying attitudes within the classroom, while economically attractive, have had limited success in decreasing bullying. This is also the case for targeted interventions aimed at strengthening the social and behavioural skills of those children who are bullied and those who bully others (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). The most 'promising ' interventions appear to be those that take a more whole school approach, yet even among these there have been considerable variations in outcomes (Smith et al, 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Legislative measures

To date in Australia there have been few criminal prosecutions of young people involved in bullying. In fact there is only one state which uses the word bullying in legislation. New South Wales is the only Australian jurisdiction to enact legislation specifically directed at bullying in schools (which would in its terms include cyberbullying), unlike, for example, the United States where sixteen states including New York, California and Illinois have statutory responses (Hartmeister & Fix-Turkowski, 2005). However, criminal offences such as assault, threats, extortion, stalking, harassment, and indecent conduct could all be applied to direct bullying. There are issues however in applying even the existing law to young people. Criminal responsibility is determined solely on the basis of age. This age has been raised by statute in all Australian jurisdictions to 10 years, meaning a cyber bully under 10 will never be criminally liable, while those aged between 10 and 14 years may

be criminally responsible if the prosecution can prove beyond reasonable doubt that the child knew he or she ought not to have committed the offence. By contrast, anyone aged 14 and over is deemed to have the requisite capacity and is thus criminally liable for his or her conduct (Campbell, Kift, & Butler, 2008). There is also the issue of considering bullying as a disciplinary or educational matter and not a criminal act.

The law in Australia in many ways has not kept pace with advances in technology and this is true for cyberbullying. However, as well as the previously mentioned laws cyberbullying could be dealt with by an increasing array of new offences, such as torture, voyeurism, cyber stalking, and telecommunications offences may be relevant.

The Australian Commonwealth *Criminal Code Act 1995* contains a number of offences which may be effective means of redress against a cyberbully who misuses telecommunication services to menace, threaten or hoax others. It an offence to use telecommunication services to menace, harass or cause offence (Butler, Kift, & Campbell, 2009).

A victim of cyberbullying may also seek compensation for the harm suffered from either the perpetrator or a third party deemed responsible for failing to take steps to prevent the hostile behaviour, such as the perpetrator's school using civil law.

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